COLOUR BAZAAR
NINE CONTEMPORARY WORKS

12 FEBRUARY - 19 JUNE 2011
Installation view
This exhibition of nine paintings and sculptures creates a colourful, eclectic and texturally diverse display for the pleasure of eye and mind; a single work by nine contemporary artists, each embodying an individual sensibility and way of making art, developed over years of practice.

They have been gathered together under the rubric of the ‘bazaar’—a speculative, curatorial proposition. Bazaars are places of display and visual seduction – where myriad wares attractively arranged entice strollers to look closer, enquire and buy. Typically bustling, overcrowded and sensory locations full of colours, materials, smells and sounds, they can also stir thoughts of mystery and enchantment. Here in the quieter spaces of the gallery, are objects of wonder, beauty and strangeness. Their contrasting textures and idiosyncratic forms complement and amplify one another generating a lively conversation between geometry and organicism, rough and smooth surfaces, soft and hard materials, explorations of structured form and experiments with anti-form.

A strong use of colour is part of these works’ allure. Whether within the spectrum of a rainbow; the shiny surfaces of pewter, the shimmer and transparency of tuille, or the saturated hues of dyed hessian or paint, colour acts as a spur to the imagination. As modernist artist Paul Klee (1879–1940) said, ‘Colour is the place where our brain and the universe meet’. These works also explore the poetic and associative qualities of materials and abstracted forms; they are conduits of cultural histories and memories, but also catalysts for experience. Continuing in a long line of experimentation with the mediums and processes of painting and sculpture, these artists pursue their own individual lines of enquiry; they variously connect with the histories of modernism; with post-minimalism’s counter to the rationalism of geometry; and with broader spheres like decoration, design and craft as well as the creativity of the kindergarten.

The exhibition begins with a magnificent sculptural rainbow made from nine coloured arcs crafted in wood. The substantial presence of Emily Floyd’s Steiner Rainbow (2006) in the gallery space contrasts with the ethereal nature of an actual rainbow. As cultural symbols, rainbows represent optimism, their many colours often being used to espouse progressive, utopian ideals expressing the desire to make the world a better place. Knowing this, Floyd takes as the starting point for her sculpture something quite humble, a wooden children’s toy that she has scaled up to adult height. She remembers as a child being given toys like this by her parents, and her manipulation of the object’s size—from small toy to large sculpture—evokes how when recalling significant things from childhood, we often exaggerate their scale.
The rainbow toy has a history and Floyd’s sculpture carries this with it too. First manufactured in the 1970s, it was inspired by the educational ideas of Austrian Theosophist, architect and social theorist Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) whose philosophy is the basis of the Steiner school movement today. A type of building block, it is intended to encourage open-ended creative play. Floyd’s interest is in the toy’s modular character: a child can use its coloured arcs to imaginatively assemble and model the world, an activity, her sculpture suggests, not unrelated to what artists do. And, like the toy, Floyd’s sculpture comes with the instruction that it can be taken apart and ‘played with’ (exhibited) in an endless variety of ways. In this, Steiner Rainbow brings to mind the little acknowledged practice of toy-making by teachers at the Bauhaus School (1919–1933, Germany) during the early, utopian phase of modernism and the correspondence they drew between ‘play (as central to toys) and creativity (as central to modern design and education).’

There is an element of play in Rose Nolan’s Flat Flower Work (2004–11), a painting installation described by the artist as ‘an architectural intervention that has a crazy energy.’ The work’s aborting, irregularly sized parts, made from painted pieces of cardboard and recycled Rorschach cards, and then pinned in a profuse and wayward fashion up and across the gallery walls. Nolan’s signature two-colour palette of red and white originally derives from her interest in propaganda posters and banners from the historical era of Russian Constructivism, while relating also to the use of these colours in contemporary advertising and design.1 Exploiting the noisy contrast of red and white, Nolan constructs in Flat Flower Work a geometric floral design with a variegated and decorative appearance, like roses splayed across a trellis, wall-paper, or crazy patchwork. In its fractured play between figure and ground, the work also resembles a cubist mural. The flower is a formal device repeated to create a dynamic rhythm, like the spinning discs in Sonia Delaunay’s paintings, or the bold 1960s pop flowers in Marimekko fabrics. ‘There is a freedom to the flat flowers’, Nolan says, ‘both in the creation of individual parts and as a total installation that allows for endless reconfiguration’, so that the work is different each time it is assembled, its overall shape growing organically from a relationship to the architecture. For some years Nolan has borrowed from the realm of home décor, for instance making sculptures in the form of floor-rugs or interior screens. Flat Flower Works further this line of thinking through its embrace of a decorative mode, while remaining firmly within the realm of painting.

As with Nolan’s work, there is an improvised, provisional air to the arrangement of parts in A.D.S. Donaldson’s Hessian House 2, 2011. The work has been assembled in the gallery space ‘as the outcome of a kind of performance’, as Donaldson describes it, in which lengths of store-bought dyed hessian have been draped in the gallery space ‘as the outcome of a kind of performance’ , as Donaldson describes it, in which lengths of store-bought dyed hessian have been draped around; like a stretcher for a canvas, the wooden frame supports the hessian. The resulting structure’s four viable sides are each an abstract composition, the components of which, although carefully considered, might on a different occasion be entirely rearranged. There is potential intent in Hessian House’s deliberate impermanence, its refusal of fixity and solidness and in the softness of its forms, through which Donaldson, in a conscious challenge to the conventional constraints of gender, aspires towards a feminine quality.2 Strangely combining lurid, flowing paintwork with symmetrical forms, Martha & Gerbi’s Rola Rola (2007) represents an abstract experiment in which the artist adapts the folding technique of ‘Rorschach’ images to make a highly charged abstract design that also intimates the figurative. Vivid colours designate insect-like forms or some strange fertility symbol against a creamy white ground, giving the painting a botanical feel, ‘a bit like a pressed flower on old paper’. The title ‘Rala rala’ translates as ‘thin thin’, a Brazilian slang word for sex. This energised field of organic shapes and fluid lines against a monochrome ground is in a style typical of 1950s French lyrical abstraction; Gerber borrows from, but also re-thinks this gestural mode by introducing a doubling or mirroring. Drawing upon the ink-blot test developed by Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach and the box-cut cardboard blocks familiar from primary school, he pours and splatters paint onto unstretched canvas, which he then folds, first along a horizontal middle line, then in several directions, to create imprints that ‘conceal the original gesture through duplication’. Sections of the work are then coloured in or touched up through a process of ‘retracing the incidental marks with more deliberate brushstrokes’. Gerber calls this method ‘painting at two speeds’ and it results in a finely wrought tension between chance, spontaneity and mimicry of the kinds of instinctive mark making usually associated with gestural abstraction. Rola Rola bespeaks us with such painterly conundrums, which are as much conceptual as they are visual. The occult is made visible through the work’s meditative embrace of jazz and the occult also enacts the artist’s concept of ‘painting backwards’, a notion inspired by the reverse audio tape effects used by the Beatles to create hypnotic, psychedelic sounds on their 1966 album ‘Revolver’, a technique pioneered by Music Concrète in the 1950s.

Julia Gorman expands the limits of painting by using adhesive vinyl directly to the wall and floor. Jungle in Here (2011) is a bold extension of abstract art architecture. A vine-like tangle of shiny lines twists its way up the walls of Heide’s access ramp, scrambles over the floor and, as if unable to be contained, reaches its tendrils into the adjacent gallery space like a wildly overgrown creeper. A sleek and quintessentially urban material, adhesive vinyl is familiar for its usage in signage, advertising and decorative decals. Gorman draws selectively from such applications of her chosen material and from the vibrant colour schemes and designs of 1970s graphics. Her bands of bright colour are reminiscent of the broad, confident sweeps of a paintbrush. But her work is also inspired by earlier traditions of ornamentation applied to architecture, such as Tiffany stained glass, Victorian plasterwork and Art Nouveau wall-paintings; think for example of the patterns of flowers and stems in the ornamental friezes embellishing Secessionist building facades in Vienna.3 Gorman’s work is less formal and more improvised than these. Cut by hand and using scissors, it has inherent imperfections. By altering a drawn design its structure also evolves organically from the process of making, in which Gorman incorporates elements of chance, for instance by using pieces left-over from cutting planned shapes elsewhere in the composition.


2 Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in this essay are taken from email correspondence or conversations held with the artists between October 2010 and January 2011.

3 For instance Stop signs and the logo for Australia Post.

4 When Donaldson exhibited his first ‘hessian house’ sculpture Untitled 1998, he had been reading Max Kozloff’s ‘The poetics of softness’ from 1967, a definitive essay in an earlier generation of postminimalist artists. In it, the pliable qualities of soft sculpture were contrasted with the ‘tenacious strength’ of more rigid forms, the former qualities being allied to feminine sensibility.

5 In particular, Gerber cites the influence of French artist Georges Mathieu (b. 1921) and German born French artist Hans Hartung (1904–1989).
A fascination with the sculptural process of casting and the associative qualities of materials motivates Hany Armanious’s cryptic sculpture Forging the Energy Body (Swegypt) (2004). Having previously made sculptures from free-form castings of a rubber substance called ‘hotmelt’, Armanious in this work turns his attention to casting in pewter using moulds to create distinct but imperfect shapes. Displayed on an assemble-at-home-style shelving unit, his rudimentary castings of loudspeakers, bells and bell-clappers are mere relics of the sound-making objects from which they have been cast. Their streaked and knotty surfaces bear chance flaws from the process of their making. The metallurgical process of transforming molten metal into solid object, or ‘forging the energy body’ as the work’s title would have it, is here portrayed as a quasi-mystical, occultist activity.

The glimmering silver of Armanious’s objects hints at the supernatural. Not only a colour, silver is also a precious metal, pewter being the poor-man’s substitute for such. Armanious delights in such lowbrow associations and pewter’s connection to trinkets and lucky charms, objects we invest with superstitious powers. On the work’s top shelf are images of frogs, magical creatures of legend and fairytale together with free-form castings (made by pouring molten metal into water) that have a striking likeness to frogspawn and tadpoles. The sculpture pivots on such chance resemblances and strange morphologies of form and revels in visual puns: for example, the likeness in shape between bells and loudspeakers and, in turn, the latter’s resemblance to lampshades—a form that appears as an internal fitting in two speaker-like aluminium objects on the work’s bottom shelf. A similarly eccentric ‘punning’ logic lies behind the work’s hybrid ABBA / Arabic music,7 the soundtrack to a video loop showing the artist repeatedly trying to fill a pepper-mill with peppercorns, an everyday activity which here takes on obsessive, ritualistic overtones.

Mikala Dwyer’s mysterious, free-form draperies and geometric headpieces are described by the artist as ‘costumes for a pataphysical theatre’.8 If pataphysics is ‘the science of imaginary solutions’, as defined by its founder the French dramatist Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), then Dwyer’s odd sculptural garments are fantastical costumes for a notional concept of theatre. While the works have on occasion been worn in performances, they are here arrayed on the wall and floor as if awaiting a call to action. As a playwright, Jarry was also a progenitor of the Theatre of the Absurd and Dwyer’s forbidding and eerily motionless creations resonate with an absurdist’s view of humans as puppets in a meaningless world. As experiments in form, they also bear a relationship to avant-garde theatre traditions, such as those of the Bauhaus, or dadaist and surrealist artists. The hardness of the shaped headpieces built from painted cardboard and papier mâché or plastic contrasts with the softness of the unstructured fabric—filmy organza, tuille, nylon, and opaque hessian and cotton—evoking a post-minimal play between form and anti-form. While Dwyer’s geometric configurations might appear like a type of minimalist sculpture, her cylinders, pyramids, cones, spheres and other more eccentric and exaggerated shapes are informed by branches of knowledge other than art, specifically expressionist architecture and the experimental science of crystallography.9 This interest is carried through in her palette of purples, greens, gold and black, which draws from the hues of mineral elements, precious stones and crystals, materials that are subject to scientific but also mystical and superstitious beliefs.

7 Digitally mixing the songs of the Swedish Pop Group ABBA with the sounds of traditional Arabic music, but also referencing the Scandinavian design company Arabia whose tableware Armanious has used as moulds for casts in other of his sculptures.

8 Mikala Dwyer, ‘Swamp Geometry’, accompanying text for Dwyer’s exhibition of the same name at Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne, 10 July–9 August 2008.

9 Dwyer’s interest in crystallography comes in part from her awareness of German educator Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852), the inventor of the kindergarten. Fröbel’s educational toys, known as ‘gifts’, were based in geometric laws that Fröbel came to understand through his early work as a crystallographer. It has been argued that these ‘gifts’, the cornerstone of his kindergarten, foreshadowed the development of abstract art and architecture. See Norman Brosterman, Inventing Kindergarten, Harry N. Abrams Inc, New York, 1997.
Colour functions in tandem with geometry in Nike Savvas’s Sliding Ladder: Truncated Icosahedron #1 (2010), a sculpture made from threads of wool attached to a wooden framework shaped as a type of icosahedron (a form familiar to us as the underlying structure of a soccer ball). This mesmerising, light-filled sculpture sits directly on the floor, but its resemblance to an orb gives it a cosmic presence. Using threads of a single colour in each of the work’s thirty-two identical hexagonal faces, Savvas makes criss-crossed designs, constructing curves from straight lines using a technique from an algebraic exercise ‘sliding ladders’, which she remembers from high-school maths class in the 1970s. By looking through the stretched threads to the other faces of the work, we see complex optical patterns and vibrations created by the contrasting colours and crisscrossing lines, an effect that is multiplied when we walk around the sculpture. As a precedent for such work, one might think of Constructivist artist Naum Gabo’s use of nylon filament attached to a supporting frame in his Linear Constructions in Space series from the 1940s. But Sliding Ladders also borrows its technique from the craft-based activity of ‘string art’, a fad of the 1970s, while its mathematical curves and patterns also recall drawings made with Spirograph, a popular children’s toy from this era.

Having encountered a rainbow sculpture at the opening of the exhibition, we come at the end to a painted spectrum of thirty-two radiant hues in Bryan Spier’s Thrown World (2010), a work inspired by the poetic idea ‘to show all the colours of the world’. The diagonal tilt of the canvas gives the unsettling yet thrilling impression that the centre of gravity has been tipped. Emanating in a dynamic fan-like formation from the lower right hand of the canvas are subtle gradations of precisely mixed colours of varying luminosity that activate what Spier calls a ‘singular movement across the picture’ or ‘the narrative trajectory of the painting’. At its centre, the painting is struck through by a deep glowing red, a visual crescendo that gains power from the modulation in tones either side of it. At the painting’s lower edge, a shade of violet so pale it is almost white, seems to test the limits of visibility. Building on the use of coloured stripes by modernist artists like Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis and Bridget Riley, Spier also explores other spatial and optical effects (as did Riley), such as those created by the sudden curve in the lines and their change in direction as they near the canvas’s upper edge. Like the abstract paintings by those artists before him, Thrown World foregrounds pure visuality without the distraction of figuration, colour being the primary catalyst of that experience.

Visiting a bazaar can bring unexpected discoveries and visual delights. An imaginative leap into Colour Bazaar can transport us to just such a place: we see metalware presented on shelves, strange garments on view, lengths of cloth set out for display; there are toy-like models, flowery patterns and abstract designs to adorn interiors, and portable surfaces with colourful motifs. We see the ready-made colours of materials—fabrics, woolen threads, adhesive vinyl, pewter and aluminium—and paint applied to canvas and cardboard surfaces as two-colour and polychrome palettes. There are artworks that confound the limits of their categorisation: a sculpture that proposes itself as a painting-in-the-round, another that allies itself to a notion of theatre, and painting installations that abandon the canvas to directly interact with architectural space. Some works are improvisations whilst others are ordered and contained. A place of richness and variety, the Colour Bazaar delivers these works to you for your contemplation and enjoyment.
Opposite
Bryan Spier
Thrown World 2010

Top
Julia Gorman
Jungle In Here (detail) 2011

Bottom
Mathysi Gerber
Rola Rola 2007
Below
Hany Armanious
Forging the Energy Body (Swaggy) 2004

Right
Mikala Dwyer
Costumes, 2008
Hany Armanious
Born 1962, Ismalia, Egypt.
Lives in Sydney.
Forging the Energy Body
(Sw Egpt) 2004
pewter, chromed aluminium, plaster, adhesive stickers, brass, LED monitor, spray enamel and silver marker on form-ply and steel. 30 second digital video loop formatted as DVD, with original ‘ARABBA’ music
154 × 117 × 90 cm
Michael Buxton Collection

A.D.S Donaldson
Born 1961, Melbourne.
Lives in Sydney.
Hessian House 2,
2011
hessian, wood
186 x 200 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the artist

Mikala Dwyer
Born 1959, Sydney.
Lives in Sydney.
Costumes
2008
cloth, cardboard, papier-mâché, synthetic polymer paint dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Emily Floyd
Born 1972, Melbourne.
Lives in Melbourne.
Steiner Rainbow
2006
two-part epoxy paint on MDF dimensions variable (approx 181 x 361 x 180 cm)
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Matthys Gerber
Lives in Sydney.
Rala Rala 2007
oil on canvas
190 x 298 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney

Julia Gorman
Born 1966, Melbourne.
Lives in Melbourne.
Jungle in Here 2011
adhesive vinyl site-specific installation
Courtesy of the artist and Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

Rose Nolan
Born 1959, Melbourne.
Lives in Melbourne.
Flat Flower Work
2004–2011
synthetic polymer paint on cardboard dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne

Nike Savvas
Born 1964, Sydney.
Lives in Sydney.
Sliding Ladder: Truncated Icosahedron #1
2010
wood, wool, steel
120 x 120 x 120 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Breenspace, Sydney

Bryan Spier
Born 1975, Canberra.
Lives in Melbourne.
thrown World 2010
synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200 x 200 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Scout, Melbourne

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Photography by John Brash
except for Matthys Gerber Rala Rala 2007, Courtesy of the artist and Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney; and Nike Savvas Sliding Ladder: Truncated Icosahedron #1 2010, Courtesy of Breenspace, Sydney.
Catalogue design by Liz Cox.


LIST OF WORKS

CURATOR’S ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CREDITS

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